

POLICY BRIEF · APRIL 2026

# Deaf communities and Minority Rights at the EU level

The EU's framework for deaf people addresses only one of two distinct sets of legal obligations. This brief sets out the case for a complementary minority rights approach, grounded in treaty commitments the EU has already undertaken.

Addressed to: European Commission · European Parliament · Council of the EU

Time horizons: ■ Immediate ◆ Short term (12–24 months) ● Long term (structural reform)

## THE POLICY PROBLEM

Deaf people in the EU are, dually, members of cultural and linguistic minorities and persons with disabilities. EU law has developed a substantial body of legislation addressing the first dimension — through the European Accessibility Act (EAA), the Audiovisual Media Service Directive (AVMSD), the European Electronic Communication Code (EECC), and the European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (ESRPD). The second dimension has received no equivalent treatment, despite the fact that the two dimensions are mutually reinforcing.

This is not a question of competence. Article 2 Treaty of the European Union (TEU) enshrines respect for the rights of persons belonging to minorities as a founding value of the Union. The CRPD - ratified by the EU and binding upon its institutions in all areas of EU competence - requires States Parties to recognise sign languages as full languages and deaf culture as a living identity deserving of protection. The absence of EU action on this dimension reflects a gap in implementation, not in legal authority.

*"Very little has been done, at the EU level, to safeguard the linguistic rights of deaf people from a minority perspective, in line with Article 2 of the TEU. The EU lacks the competency to recognize national sign languages as full languages."*

Prof. Nicolas Levrat, UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues — End-of-Mission Statement, Brussels, January 2026

## WHY THE DISABILITY FRAMEWORK IS INSUFFICIENT

The EAA, AVMSD, EECC, and European Disability Strategy address the barriers deaf people face as persons with disabilities. By design, they do not address what flows from linguistic and cultural minority status: the intergenerational transmission of sign languages, access to cultural life in one's own language, collective political representation, and the recognition of the 29 national sign languages as official languages of the Union.

EUD's analysis of EU accessibility legislation confirms that none of these instruments engages with the linguistic and cultural minority dimension of deaf communities, nor were they designed to. A disability framework removes barriers; a minority rights framework confers recognition. Both are necessary, and neither substitutes for the other. The EU currently provides only one. The consequence is a structural policy gap that accessibility measures cannot close — and were never intended to.

## THE THREE STRUCTURAL LEGAL GAPS

<p><b>01</b></p> <p><b>The FCNM gap</b></p> <p>No EU Member State has formally included deaf communities within its Framework Convention on National Minorities (FCNM) commitments. The only binding and monitored European minority rights instrument does not apply to deaf communities.</p>	<p><b>02</b></p> <p><b>The ECRML gap</b></p> <p>National sign languages are not systematically included in European Charter of Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) reporting. Where they are – Finland, Spain – the Charter's territorial architecture limits effectiveness for non-territorial minorities.</p>	<p><b>03</b></p> <p><b>The EU ratification gap</b></p> <p>The EU has ratified the CRPD but not the FCNM, ECRML, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), or the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), operating outside the minority rights framework that binds its own Member States individually.</p>
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**WHAT INTERNATIONAL BODIES HAVE FOUND**

The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities' 2025 Concluding Observations on the EU (CRPD/C/EU/CO/2-3) found that national sign languages are not part of the EU's multilingualism framework and recommended that the EU recognise 29 national sign languages as official EU languages, with corresponding amendments to the Rules of Procedure of EU institutions (para. 53(a)). The former UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Prof. Gerard Quinn described official language status for sign languages as "an obvious issue of law reform that ought to be contemplated and put on the agenda" (Quinn, 2023). The UN Special Rapporteur (SR) on Minority Issues Prof. Nicolas Levrat's January 2026 end-of-mission statement documented the same absence at EU level. The EU has been found non-compliant with its CRPD obligations by the body mandated to monitor them. These findings are on record and require a substantive institutional response.

**A CONCRETE ILLUSTRATION: PETITION 1056/2016**

In 2016, EUD submitted a petition requesting that deaf citizens be permitted to petition the European Parliament in a national sign language. After nearly a decade, the petition remains unresolved – not for reasons of technical impossibility (the portal accepts video submissions; translators covering all 29 EU national sign languages have been identified), but because of an unresolved legal question over the Rules of Procedure. This case illustrates how a language rights obligation is consistently reframed as an accessibility problem, and why the two frameworks must be addressed in parallel rather than in sequence.

**Recommendations**

Addressed to EU institutions · Sequenced by political feasibility and time horizon

**EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT (EP)**

Committee on Petitions (PETI) · Committee on Constitutional Affairs (AFCO) · Disability Intergroup

**1 Resolve Petition 1056/2016 ■ IMMEDIATE**

AFCO should establish a working group to amend Rule 226 of the Rules of Procedure to permit sign language video submissions, or the Bureau should adopt a decision under

paragraph 6 confirming that national sign languages fall within its existing scope. The matter has been before the Parliament for ten years without resolution.

## 2 Provide systematic sign language access to EP proceedings ■ IMMEDIATE

International Sign interpretation for EP plenary sessions and committee meetings should be provided as a standing language rights measure, not on an ad hoc basis — consistent with the CRPD Committee's 2025 recommendations (para. 53(a)) and the EP's own resolution of November 2025 on the EU strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities post-2024 (2025/2057(INI))

### EUROPEAN COMMISSION

DG Justice · DG EAC · DG CONNECT · Secretariat-General

## 3 Make public consultations accessible in national sign languages ■ IMMEDIATE

All public consultations should include sign language video submission options. The absence of this provision from the Commission's own 2025–2026 consultation on the disability rights strategy — raised in written parliamentary question E-000693/2026 — is in tension with Article 21 of the EU Charter and the CRPD Committee's recommendations.

## 4 Establish a coordination mechanism for linguistic minority issues ■ IMMEDIATE

The Commission should establish a dedicated focal point for minority issues that explicitly includes linguistic minorities and deaf communities, with structured engagement with EUD and National Associations of the Deaf. SR Levrat's 2026 end-of-mission statement identified the current approach as insufficient to meet the Union's Article 2 TEU obligations.

## 5 Give substantive content to the European Day of Sign Languages (17 June) ◆ SHORT TERM

Following the Council's endorsement of 17 June as the European Day of Sign Languages (ST-13453-2025-INIT), the Commission should develop an annual reporting cycle on progress towards NSL officialisation and publish an account of EU-funded activity supporting deaf cultural and linguistic life.

## 6 Integrate minority rights into the MFF 2028–2034 funding instruments ◆ SHORT TERM

The AgoraEU programme (successor to Creative Europe and CERV) and Erasmus+ should explicitly recognise sign language communities as linguistic and cultural minorities eligible for support on those grounds, separately from and in addition to disability eligibility criteria. Article 167 TFEU provides the relevant legal basis.

### COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council · EPSCO formation · COREPER

## 7 Adopt Council conclusions recognising deaf communities as linguistic minorities ◆ SHORT TERM

The Council should adopt conclusions recognising deaf communities as linguistic minorities under EU primary law and national sign languages as languages of those minorities,

consistent with Articles 2 TEU and 22 of the Charter. Such conclusions would provide the political foundation for the legislative steps that follow.

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## **8 Examine the conditions for EU accession to the FCNM and ECRML** ◆ **SHORT TERM**

23 of 27 EU Member States have ratified the FCNM; 16 of 27 the ECRML. EU accession would not introduce fundamentally new obligations for most Member States, but would close the structural gap whereby the EU operates outside the minority rights framework to which its Member States are individually party.

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## **9 Recognise national sign languages as official EU languages** • **LONG TERM**

The Council should take the legislative steps necessary — through amendment of Regulation 1/1958 or a distinct instrument — to grant the 29 national sign languages of the EU official status. All 27 EU Member States have done so at national level. The CRPD Committee's 2025 Concluding Observations (para. 53(a)) and the UN Special Rapporteur on Disability confirm this as a treaty obligation, not merely a policy aspiration.

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